

ZYGOTE

Things do move pretty fast in the computing world, but Zygote is frankly amazed that this column has been going for 20 years – and even more amazed that people are still reading it

DOUBLE DUTCH

The origin of a malicious email that caused a full-blown diplomatic row between Israel and Holland has been identified by *The Jerusalem Post*. The Israeli Foreign Ministry ranked it a major incident and the Dutch Foreign Ministry was on the verge of breaking off diplomatic relations, before the culprit was fingered as an automated online translation engine called Babylon.

This is a free web service that accepts plain text input when translating from Hebrew to Dutch. However, it cannot cope with the accents used on certain Hebrew vowel characters. When Israeli journalists submitted a list of queries to the Dutch Consul about a forthcoming seminar, they asked five questions containing the word 'ha'im', which means 'if'. The robot scribe translated this without the accent, and it came out in Dutch as 'mother'. The translation took on a faintly obscene tone, as Holland's chief diplomat was quizzed about his mum's preferences in the bedroom department.

Zygote knows that wars have been started over lesser insults, and fervently hopes the launch codes of Israel's nuclear weapons are not entrusted to Babylon.

AFTER EIGHT

Microsoft has commissioned Pyramid Research to survey more than 10 thousand punters across 13 countries, asking what single

improvement they would like to see in their laptop computers. The questions were put in such a stupid way that they were bound to come up with the same overwhelming response, and this they duly did. Eight out of 10 users would like to have built-in mobile broadband, with instantaneous access to email and the web, from any location, and all for free. Surprise, surprise.

Zygote has pondered this result, and is still puzzling over what the other two out of 10 users could possibly want. A plug-in USB goose that lays golden eggs, perhaps?

GANDER SAUCE

Zygote is intrigued by the demand from the Information Commissioner Richard Thomas that hospital workers should be fined £5,000 for losing confidential patient data stored on laptops. Giving evidence to the House of Lords Constitution Committee, Thomas declared that doctors and nurses who have their laptops stolen are guilty of gross negligence and recklessly flouting data protection principles.

So why doesn't Commissioner Thomas demand the deportation of every one of the 95 Home Office employees who have lost laptops containing personal data over a six-month period? And surely he should be in favour of shooting the blithering idiots responsible for losing 600 Ministry of Defence laptops over the past five years?

And what about the Foreign and Commonwealth Office security breach of a few weeks ago when the personal data belonging to all visa applicants was made visible to website visitors? Come on, Commissioner – let's hang, draw and quarter the criminals!

DIALECTICS

Eight years ago, Eric Ramsey was involved in a car smash that left him unable to move or speak. His communication was restricted to his eye movements, so he seems an ideal volunteer for having his thoughts read by a computer.

Electrodes have been implanted under the surface of his brain, to monitor signals from 41 neurons in the areas that would normally control his speech. So far, the machine has correctly identified signals associated with Mr Ramsey imagining he can say 'oh', 'ee' and 'oo'.

Zygote condemns the bad taste suggestion that the same software should be used as the dialogue coach on *Emmerdale*.

LESS IS MORE

Camelot, the National Lottery company for taxing dreams and greed, has scrapped its short-lived Cool Cash scratch-card, in which players had to reveal the lowest temperature to win cash prizes. This is because so many players refused to believe the computer when it said they had won nothing.

Twenty-three-year-old Tina Farrel is typical of the thousands of hapless innumerates, insisting, "My card said I had to find temperatures lower than -8. The numbers I uncovered were -6 and -7, so I thought I had won, and so did the woman in the shop. But when she scanned the card, the machine said I hadn't. I phoned Camelot and they fobbed me off with some story that -6 is higher, not lower, than -8, but I'm not having it."

Zygote hereby confirms that numeric education in this country is a load of old double 4/3 times Pi times r cubed.

TWENTY-TWENTY VISION

We celebrate 20 continuous years of Zygote's last words, tucked here inside the back cover of *Shopper*. For two whole decades this column has teetered above the glorious Great Moments cartoon strip, which is penned by two of the nicest guys Zygote has never met.

The editor has always refused to reveal the identity of whoever writes Zygote. Some think Zygote is male, others female. Some accuse Zygote of a loony left bias, others detect rabid rightwing sentiments. And there are those who claim that Zygote is a construct of several contributors culled from the nearest pub. But this is not so. Every word of this column has been written by the same author since the very first issue.

The Zygote *nom de plume* was chosen because the word refers to the first fusion of a cell with the potential for developing life. It was also the very last word in the LocoScript spellchecker on the Amstrad PCW-8256, used to write the very first of these pieces. How satisfying, and how apt.

So this is Zygote speaking from the heart that beats within her/his/its ribcage. Love and thanks for reading. Here's to our next 20 glorious years together. ☞

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Yes, it's true, Great Moments in Computing is the longest-running comic strip in any computer magazine on Earth



For 20 years, we've delighted in exploiting celebrities not normally dragged into our computing world...



And none of this would be possible without the continued support of our illustrious editor.